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# To Have Kissed a ST KILDAN LASSIE

**Andrew Wiseman** relates how Alexander Carmichael was delighted, while collecting folklore material

One of the best known facts about St Kilda is that the whole population left in 1930, but perhaps one of the lesser-known facts about this island is that it was repopulated by other Hebrideans (mainly from Skye but also from Harris) during the late 1720s. Owing to an outbreak of smallpox, the indigenous population was almost completely destroyed (only four adults and two dozen children survived).

The decision was taken by the then owner, MacLeod of Dunvegan, to have the island repopulated to become economically viable by bringing in rents. MacDonalds, Fergussons, MacKinnons, MacLeods, Gillieses and Morrisons became familiar surnames among the islanders and bear witness to these newcomers and their descendants.

Despite, or perhaps mainly, because of the island's remoteness - lying some 40 miles to the west - St Kilda from the mid-19th Century on became a popular tourist attraction for its natural history in an exotic location. Some visitors thought they were viewing a pristine arcadia previously only known to a select few. Such a fancy was far from the truth.

## 'To Propagate the Natural History'

Martin Martin (c1668 -1718), an indigenous Gael, is remembered for his *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1703), which, it is said, partly inspired Boswell and



Johnson's later tour. Martin, originally from Skye, visited the island in 1697, and a year later published his observations in *A Late Journal to St Kilda*. His introduction relates a great desire 'to propagate the natural history ... without any disguise.'

A similar motivation influenced Alexander Carmichael - another Gael, born on Lismore in 1832 - who became an exciseman on Uist and soon visited St Kilda. In his spare time Carmichael amassed much Gaelic lore, including charms, songs, stories, hymns, proverbs and so on. A fraction of these were later edited and published to wide acclaim as *Carmina Gadelica* (1900).

Alexander Carmichael's first of only two trips to St Kilda took place on 22 May 1865. He left Lochmaddy, in North Uist, at 4.30 a.m. and the boat sailed through the Sound of Harris, where Carmichael would have caught sight of St Clement's church in Rodel. A further six hours into the journey and St Kilda appeared on the horizon. He notes included:

*Islands look magnificent rising up of the water in the mist. Slight breeze on the starboard side. Arrived at St Kilda about 12 noon. Fine open bay. Bold rocks and remarkably grand. Landed in first boat. Was at manse. Poorly furnished but good house. Cameron the missionary oldish and common looking. St Kildans good looking s[t]out fellows with pale complexions. Woman good looking and ruddy complexions. Women high shoulders and crouched figures and bad ankles and feet. Beautiful white teeth. Pronunciation peculiar and lisping. People seem to be spoiled not polite.*

### Idiosyncratic Impressions

After having jotted down his first and rather idiosyncratic impressions of the St Kildans and purchasing some 10? yards of cloth for 14 shillings and a bottle of fulmar oil for one shilling, Carmichael continues his narrative:

*Kissed a St Kilda lassie. A little beauty with dark brown eyes and fresh complexion about ten or eleven years. Kissed her so as to have to say that I kissed a St Kildan lassie. Saw men*

*going on rocks. Fearful sights. The deep blew fathomless ocean roaring many hundred feet beneath them. Took out the fulmars and some eggs. Birds vomiting oil - painful sights.*

Rather surprisingly, Carmichael's recollection of his journey stops there, but it was the natives themselves rather than the remote location of the island itself that left more of a lasting impression on him. Besides, it was with the express purpose of garnering information from a tradition-bearer called Effie MacCrimmon or Oighrig NicCruimein that Carmichael had travelled to St Kilda in the first place.

### Something of a Disappointment

As things turned out the journey was something of a disappointment for Carmichael. Although he managed to get some material down, it was not without a struggle:

*... which the writer took down ... from Eibhrig Nic Cruimein, Euphemia MacCrimmon, cottar, aged eighty-four years, who had many old songs, stories, and traditions of the island. I would have got more of these had there been peace and quiet to take them down, but his was not to be had among a crowd of naval officers and seamen and St Kilda men, women and children, and, even nosier than these, St Kilda dogs, made with excitement and all barking at once. The aged reciter was much censured for her recital of these stories and poems, and the writer for causing the old woman to stir the recesses of her memory for this lore; for the people of St Kilda have not discarded songs and music, dancing, folklore, and the stories of the foolish past.*

As far as is known Alexander Carmichael returned only once to St Kilda and he may well have been dissuaded by the experience of his initial trip to try and collect more about St Kilda or from St Kildans. Nonetheless three pieces were published as *Iorram Hirteach* (St Kilda Lilt), *Cha B'e Sgioba na Faiche* (It was no Crew of Landsmen) and *Òran Luathaidh Iortach* (St Kilda Waulking Song) - all of which had been collected from Effie MacCrimmon. ▶





### The Conversation

As well as these there is a wonderful piece entitled *An Combradh* (The Conversation) which was composed by her parents together during their courtship days, a translated excerpt of which gives a flavour of the whole:

*He:*

*Thou art my turtle-dove, thou art my mavis,*

*Thou art my melodious harp in the sweet morning*

*She:*

*Thou are my treasure, my lovely one, my huntsman,*

*Yesterday thou gavest me the gannet and the auk.*

Introducing these various pieces, Carmichael wrote: 'Martin reports that the men and women of St Kilda had a genius for poetry, music, and dancing, to all of which they were addicted. Dr Johnson, on the other hand, declared that no good poetry could come from St Kilda.' By Carmichael's own admission what he found in St Kilda would probably not have satisfied Johnson, but nevertheless reflects the tenacity of tradition even in places where religious intolerance against it was growing.

After whetting his appetite with *Iorram Suirghe*, Effie begged Carmichael to return the next day so that she could pass on more songs to him. But the island's minister, the Revd John Mackay, warned him not to 'trouble' the old lady again as

Portrait of Alexander Carmichael c.1899  
by William Skeoch Cumming



she was nearing the end of her life and should not be concerning herself with such secular trivialities. So Carmichael left the island sadly though not completely empty-handed, although the rest of Effie's songs went with her to the grave.

## To Ignore Their Own Traditions

It may be something of coincidence that Carmichael's first visit was in the year in which Mackay was sent to the island. He had immediately set about imposing a particularly strict religious rule over the islanders. The St Kildans embraced his teaching and began to ignore their own traditions. Though not a personal rebuke to the resident minister, Carmichael was later to express his considerations of narrow-minded clergymen:

*Is there no minister of religion courageous enough, philanthropic enough, far-seeing enough to come to the rescue of these interesting people and bring them out of their slough of despond, out of their windless, waveless, tideless, motionless doldrum into which erroneous seamanship led them and wherein they exist, and back again to their many sports, wholesome functions and joyous pastimes of their father? If not, the time may come when these highly endowed men and women shall discover for themselves that religious dogmas are dry husks and that labour without recreation is wearisome.*

Carmichael, like many others, had taken a great deal of trouble to reach the remotest of the British isles, but did not foresee what was in store for him. However, he did not go home without some of the St Kildans leaving a discernible and lasting impression upon him. ■



The Revd John Mackay. Uncomplimentary caricature (above) by John Sands, *Out of the World; or Life in St Kilda* (Edinburgh, 1878),

